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On Tolkien's reappraisal of the fairy-story

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Although many scholars have produced an abundance of reflections on the fairy-story, especially since the rediscovery of the genre by the Romantics, there is no such thing as a theory of the tale. This essentially ill-defined province of literature still lacks a well-developed body of theoretical texts that could compare with the research accomplished for mimetic fiction, notably in the second half of the twentieth century. This gap in literary theory is due in part to the rather wide-spread view, held among others by Northrop Frye, that myth and the folk-tale remain pre-literary categories. However, Frye's archetypal criticism, as well as other schools of criticism in the wake of post-structuralist and anthropological studies, has something to say about the literary genre of Fantasy, of which Tolkien is rightly considered as a founding father. Fantasy has asserted itself only recently in literary history, perhaps, for the academic community to take it seriously. Yet there is a growing tendency today, particularly in the United Kingdom, to bring this widely popular branch of literature within the pale of academic research. This is sometimes called 'cross-over' literature, or more playfully 'kiddult' or 'chadult' literature, because these works often started off as juvenile literature but gradually conquered an increasing adult readership. Tolkien had addressed this issue as early as the 1960s, by insisting that 'actually, the association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history'. (34) He compared the fate of fairy-tales to that of precious objects gradually defaced and deteriorated through too long a relegation to the nursery, like a valuable antique left over for children to play

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with. 'Collections of fairy-stories', he said, 'are, in fact, by nature attics and lumber-rooms, only by temporary and local custom play-rooms'. (35) But his approach to the fairy-story is innovative precisely in so far as it is no longer merely an antiquarian's interest, but demonstrates the creative potential of the genre.

The limited space of this article does not allow for a wide-ranging study of such a vast topic. The present argument, therefore, will concentrate on two remarkable essays by Tolkien – his 1964 article, 'On Fairy Story', and, to a lesser extent, his ground-breaking 1936 paper entitled '*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics'. My point of departure, as far as the critical reception of Tolkien's theses on fairy-stories is concerned, is an article by Robert J. Reilly, 'Tolkien and the Fairy Story', reprinted in the 1968 collection of essays, *Tolkien and the Critics*. I propose to address briefly two main issues – Tolkien's rejection of allegory, which can be considered as a case of intentional fallacy, and his revision of some high-romantic concepts and ideas such as Imagination and the organic conception of literature.

Tolkien's take on fairy-story notoriously distinguishes itself by a radical rejection of the notion of allegory. He repeatedly and rather polemically contends that fairy-stories are not in their essence allegorical. Speaking of *The Lord of the Rings*, in a commentary on his own essay, 'On Fairy Story', he declares in a 1956 letter to Michael Straight that 'There is *no* "allegory," moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all. It is a "fairy-story,"' and he goes on to say that 'fairy-story has its own mode of reflecting "truth," different from allegory, or (sustained) satire, or "realism," and in some ways more powerful'. Of course, he does not pretend to deny that 'something of the teller's own reflections and "values" will inevitably get worked in 'but he insists that 'This is not the same as allegory' (*Letters* 232-3). We can infer that he means to turn his back on anything like a mimetic conception of literary creation, and that this is a very radical stance, for he will not even admit the indirect form of mimesis that allegory turns out to be. This also constitutes a blunt contradiction to such superficial readers and critics of his work who refuse to see it as anything other than an allegorical expression of the author's personal values and beliefs as a Catholic and a conservative of sorts. Indeed most serious critics rally to this opinion, and consider this as one of the grounds on which Tolkien differs from authors such as C. S. Lewis or Charles Williams among his Oxford friends of the 'Inklings' group, who wrote Fantasy with an intention to promote their Christian ideas.

With Tolkien, things are more subtle, and probably altogether different. But this conscious, determined resistance to anything like an allegorical mode of writing may also help explain why those theories of the fairy-tale which bear heavily on psychology or psychoanalysis are of no avail for Tolkien, because these are inherently allegorical modes of interpretation. For instance, Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian reading in *The Uses of Enchantment* (*Psychanalyse des contes de fées*) amounts to little more than an instrumentalisation of some traditional fairy-tales for the proper education of children, interpreting them as allegories of the typical problems of adolescence. Similarly, Marie-Louise von Franz, in *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* and other books in the same vein, undertakes a brilliant, long-winded translation of the imagery of fairy-stories into the appellations of complexes and archetypes of Jungian psychology. When all is told, these forms of theorising have little to say from a literary point of view, and one might even consider that they evacuate the tales *qua* literary texts. Marie-Louise von Franz tends to relegate these literary artefacts a little deeper down the lumber-room of some pre-psychoanalytical dark age. Bruno Bettelheim's methods could be applied to those living tissues of the genre that children's literature constitutes, but only from the exclusively allegorical point of view of modern educationists who would have swapped the Christian doctrine for a Freudian *Weltanshauung* in which, after all, art and literature are little more than clinical symptoms or provisionally useful instruments.

These basically allegorical analyses of fairy stories could be generically called 'archetypal criticism', because their essentially structuralist readings always aim at reducing the literary text to their structural or archetypal components. An epitome of that species of critics is no doubt the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, whose *Morphology of the Folk Tale* is a beautiful illustration of what Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote that 'Our meddling intellect / Mishshapes the beauteous forms of things; / – We murder to dissect' ('The Tables Turned', *Lyrical Ballads* 105). Likewise, Seamus Heaney says that he avoids reading academic criticism of his poetry because it makes him feel like a pig in a bacon factory. Tolkien, although a proficient academic, said that '[t]he analytic study of fairy-stories is as bad a preparation for the enjoying or the writing of them as would be the historical study of the drama of all lands and times for the enjoyment or writing of stage-plays' (*Tree and Leaf* 50-51). One of the most endearing characteristics of Hobbits is that they have 'a love of things that grow, and which are not sterile'. And Tolkien very early made his coming-out by declaring, 'I am in fact a *Hobbit* (in all but size)' (To Deborah Webster, 25 Oct. 1958, *Letters* 288). He had said earlier, 'I

dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory', in a letter where he explains that '[t]he mere stories were the thing. They arose in my mind as "given" things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew [...] yet always I had the sense of recording what was already "there," somewhere: not of "inventing"' (To Milton Waldman, 14 Sept. 1950, *Letters* 145). This is an old 'romantic' idea of literary creation, also expressed for instance by Roger Caillois about the fantastic: 'The fantastic requires something involuntary, passively undergone, a worried as well as worrying interrogation, rising at unawares from some mysterious darkness, that the author is compelled to take as it comes'.[1] This opinion is attacked by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* and brushed aside as a case of 'intentional fallacy' (*Introduction à la littérature fantastique* 40). Todorov does not elaborate his point here, saying that the arguments are too well-known to be repeated. But perhaps a elaboration should be made once again in this instance all the same, by going back to W. K. Wimsatt's definition of the concept in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*:

> Intentional Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its origins, a special case of what is known to philosophers as the Genetic Fallacy. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological *causes* of the poem and ends in biography and relativism. (21)

Tolkien makes clear that what he rejects is precisely what he calls 'intentional allegory'. Of course, he is actually speaking of 'conscious and intentional allegory', and Wimsatt's definition of Intentional Fallacy may extend to the unconscious intention, which would fall into the category of the 'psychological *causes* of the poem', but such a consideration brings us round to what has been said above about psychoanalytical criticism. There is good reason to believe that Tolkien's acceptation of what he calls 'intentional allegory 'includes the unconsciously intentional, and that this is also what he has in mind when he says that 'Fairy-stories are by no means rocky matrices out of which the fossils cannot be prised except by an expert geologist' (33). But a fully satisfactory discussion of this point would involve taking into account several possible definitions of the unconscious, which necessitates a much wider debate. Besides, whereas Wimsatt and Todorov are here discussing literary criticism, Tolkien

[1] 'Il faut au fantastique quelque chose d'involontaire, de subi, une interrogation inquiète non moins qu'inquiétante, surgie à l'improviste d'on ne sait quelles ténèbres, que son auteur fut obligé de prendre comme elle est venue' (R. Caillois quoted in Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 46).

and Caillois are speaking of literary creation. But Todorov comes round to seeing eye to eye with Tolkien with a remark on the *Quest for the Grail* in *The Poetics of Prose*, when he says that 'if the author perhaps did not know very well what he was writing, the tale itself did know'.[2]

In *The Fantastic*, however, Todorov continues his argument by invoking a well-known distinction between allegory and symbol. He starts with Goethe's remark that the allegorical signifies indirectly, whereas the symbolical does so directly (236). Allegory, Todorov also says, is successive, whereas symbol is simultaneous. He then quotes Georg Friedrich Creuzer, who, in *Symbolism and Mythology of the Ancient Peoples: Particularly the Greeks* (1810), argues that allegory, as opposed to symbol, includes myth, to which belongs most perfectly the epic in its progression, which only tends to condense into symbolism in the case of *theomythia* (255). Todorov goes on to say that in a symbol, the signified itself has become signifier, so that there is a fusion of the two sides of the sign; whereas in an allegory these two sides remain clearly separate from one another (250). It is interesting to note that this is precisely Barthes's definition of myth in *Mythologies*, as a '*second-order semiological system*'[3] but which contradicts Creuzer's idea of myth as essentially an allegorical, narrative or diegetic progression. Of course, we are here comparing theories more than a hundred years distant from one another in time, since Creuzer wrote in the early nineteenth century, Barthes and Todorov in the late twentieth. But it tends to show that in the field of literary theory this is still a slippery zone. In the case of Tolkien, moreover, this is a particularly arresting issue, because the very novelty of his 1936 article '*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics' resided precisely in his declaration that '*Beowulf* is not an epic' (111). As if further to implicitly invalidate Creuzer's argument, Tolkien added that 'No terms borrowed from the Greek or other literatures exactly fit: there is no reason why they should'. And he explained that it is a mistake to judge *Beowulf* as a narrative text, because its diegetic, syntagmatic, linear progression is on the whole merely an impression generated by the fact that language has to unfold in time, but that this literary work operates

[2] 'Or, si l'auteur pouvait ne pas savoir très bien ce qu'il était en train d'écrire, le conte, lui, le savait' (Todorov, *Poètique de la prose* 80).

[3] 'But myth is a peculiar system in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before him: *it is a second-order semiological system*. [...] Everything happens as if myth was shifting the formal system of the first significations sideways' (Barthes 114-5).

structurally rather like some kind of mathematical space, and is a many-dimensional composition:

> Judgement of the verse has often gone astray through listening for an accentual rhythm and pattern: and it seems to halt and stumble. Judgement of the theme goes astray through considering it as the narrative handling of a plot: and it seems to halt and stumble. Language and verse, of course, differ from stone or wood or paint, and can be only heard or read in time-sequence; so that in any poem that deals at all with characters and events some narrative element must be present. We have none the less in *Beowulf* a method and structure that within the limits of the verse-kind approaches rather to sculpture or painting. It is a composition not a tune. (110)

Tolkein's thesis concerning the structure and composition of *Beowulf* is largely valid for his own work as fairy-story, or as an instance of Fantasy such as he defines it as a literary genre in 'On Fairy Story'. In his vocabulary, the converse of 'allegory' is not 'symbol' but 'myth' or 'mythology'. When he uses the word 'symbolism', it is more or less in the same sense as 'allegory', as, for instance, when he says 'There is *no* "symbolism" or conscious allegory in my story' (To Herbert Schiro, 17 Nov. 1957, *Letters* 262). He insists that his whole effort was not to create a story in the sense of a narrative but much rather as a 'Secondary World', distinct from the 'Primary World' of realist fiction, thus achieving what he called 'sub-creation': 'This aspect of "mythology" – sub-creation, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world – is, I think, too little considered' (26). It is also well-known, because Tolkien said so on several occasions, that he did not plan *The Lord of the Rings* in advance, but launched into writing it out without having a story at all. His work was not conceived as a linear construction, but as an organic growth. Very much as *Beowulf*, he says, 'seems to halt and stumble', Tolkien's own composition seems to have grown in bulk and gone through substantial revisions after he had to overcome several moments when the story came to a halt: 'Finally, I present the future researcher with a little problem. The tale halted in the telling for about a year at two separate points: where are they?' (To the Editor of *The Observer*, 18 Feb. 1938, *Letters* 32). It may well be that this mode of writing asserted itself more resolutely after *The Hobbit*, which is more like a simple narrative, in the manner of his earlier tales such as *Farmer Giles of Ham* or *Leaf by Niggle*. This non-linear, organic growth was confirmed, after *The Lord of the Rings*, by the publication of its 'prequel' *The Silmarillion* and the *Tales of Beleriand* or the *Lost Tales* published by Christopher Tolkien after the death of his father, which appear for the most part as variants of the

previously published stories. The critic Tom Shippey, in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000) defends the thesis that Tolkien's work should be seen as another example of the 'Mythical Method' that T. S. Eliot saw as an alternative to the narrative method in his essay, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth':

> Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. (178)

Such a consideration, suggesting that Tolkein be read along with T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, should perhaps make us wary of too hasty a classification of Tolkien in the category of those so-called anti-modernist, reactionary romantics. Incidentally, Antoine Compagnon, in *Les Anti-Modernes, de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (2005), studies a peculiar family of authors who have been anti-modernists much as Byron was an anti-romantic, to whom Tolkien is perhaps not such a distant relative. If time and space allowed, one could compare Tolkien with Joyce in another respect. One key concept of Tolkien in 'On Fairy-Stories' is what he calls 'eucatastrophe', which can be seen as a variant of 'epiphany', such as Joyce defines it in *Stephen Hero*. But, instead, I would like to conclude by briefly alluding to the way in which Tolkien attempts Bloomian revisions of three important romantic notions; Coleridge's Imagination and 'suspension of disbelief' and Carlyle's world-tree.

Even though early critics thought of him as not well-read in English literature, Tolkien was a rare literary erudite, with a taste for provocation. Thus, for instance, he famously declared in a 1955 letter to W. H. Auden that he 'cordially dislike[d] Shakespeare'. Much in the same iconoclastic style, 'On Fairy-Story' contains a polemical engagement *contra* Coleridge. Tolkien in fact challenges Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy, according to which Imagination in its highest form is equated with Primary Imagination, defined as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (I, 202)' whereas Fancy is 'no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time & space', which 'must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association' (I 304-5). Tolkien argues to abrogate this dichotomy and to achieve a reversal of Coleridge's axiom. Imagination is thus redefined by him as simply 'the mental power of image-making'. And the capacity to achieve 'the inner consistency of reality' he calls Art, of which the highest form for him is 'Sub-creative Art', the human genius or power to create a 'Secondary World', much as Coleridge's 'infinite I AM' is

the Creator of the 'Primary World'. He then goes further to replace Fancy by the older word Fantasy, to

> embrace both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the expression, derived from the Image: a quality essential to fairy-story. [...] I am thus not only aware but glad of the etymological and semantic connexions of *fantasy* with *fantastic*: with images of things that are not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there. [...] Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent. (44)

Just as Coleridge's Imagination could be equated with the Kantian definition of Reason, Tolkien then drives the nail in by insisting that 'Fantasy is a rational, not an irrational activity' (44n). But this conceptual onslaught – which, if taken as seriously as indeed it ought to be, sounds very much like an equivalent of the Marxian reversal of Hegelian dialectics in the Perilous Realm of Faërie – had been prepared by a barrage on the lesser canonical notion of the 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Tolkien argued that such a thing is nothing but a sure sign that the literary attempt at 'sub-creation' has failed to achieve 'the inner consistency of reality', and that the audience or the reader is obliged to compensate for it 'by kindliness or circumstance': 'this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed'. (37) It is possible to view this as an anti-romantic jibe at the blasé gesture of 'romantic irony' considered here as a sheer admission of failure, as exemplified for instance by the conditional mode in the last part of 'Kubla Khan': 'Could I revive within me / Her symphony & song, [...] / I would build that dome in air, / That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!'

Similarly, it is remarkable how Tolkein roots his own doctrine of literary organicism in the metaphor of the 'world-tree' used in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* by Carlyle, who derives it from the Norse myth of the Igdrasil. He says, for instance: 'Nay, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a twig too of this same world-tree'. Tolkien revises this image when he speaks of the 'Tree of Tales' (23), which provides him with a graphic image to illustrate his vision of literature as a world phenomenon in which tales grow from one another, very much as living organisms reproduce themselves generation after generation, or as languages derive from one another over the ages. This is, of course, a philologist's vision of literature. But it also comes with the implication that words operate with a 'magic' similar to that of seeds, in

which whole tales are as it were genetically contained. Characters grow from names, stories grow from characters, worlds grow like a 'web of story', and, what is more, 'History often resembles "Myth"', Tolkien says, 'because they are both ultimately of the same stuff' (31). That is what he is referring to when he explains:

> The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows [...]. [*The Lord of the Rings*] is to me, anyway, largely an essay in 'linguistic aesthetic', as I sometimes say to people who ask me 'what is it all about?' (To the Houghton Mifflin Co., 5 June 1955, *Letters* 219-220).

But this vision of the world has undergone a long defeat, under the conjugated blows of 'misologists' such as Max Müller who peremptorily declared that mythology is a 'disease of language', – thus in fact contributing in the long run to the near extinction of philology as a field of academic research – and ideologists who, after Thomas Mann, rushed to the wild conclusion that the folk-tale and the so-called *Volkisch Romantik* were the one root of European barbarism (unless perhaps it was really the other way around). Tzvetan Todorov, in a discussion of the *Arabian Nights* and *The Manuscript Found in Zaragoza*, came closer to an understanding of Tolkien's sub-creative art, when he wrote that in these texts 'Every new character means a new plot. We are in the realm of story-men'[4] (Todorov, *Poètique de la prose* 37). But furthering this discourse would result in the making of too long a tale.

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[4] '*Les Mille et une nuits* nous donne une réponse très nette que reprend et confirme le *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*: le personnage, c'est une histoire virtuelle qui est l'histoire de sa vie. Tout nouveau personnage signifie une nouvelle intrigue. Nous sommes dans le royaume des hommes-récits' (Todorov, *Poètique de la prose* 37).

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White man burnt black: Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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In the Canadian novel *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje's Lásló Almásy is a prostrate Hungarian burnt beyond recognition; he is imagined and constructed as a white Englishman by Hana, his Canadian nurse, and Kip, the Indian sapper.[1] Using Almásy as focus, Ondaatje's text suggests how identities are constructed and received and how they draw on stereotypes like that of the English colonist. His work begs one to ask how fictions of national and racial identity relate to perceptions of epidermally defined nationality and race as well as to cultural, even colonial, nostalgia. The transformation of an injured Hungarian with charred skin into an Englishman reveals the persistence of colonialist biases. This paper argues in its first section that Hana, Kip and a host of postcolonial critics use physical stereotypes and assumptions to substantiate Almásy's identity as, bewilderingly, English, black, blank or nationless; in the second section I suggest Ondaatje embeds in the patient's injured whiteness references to fascism, the punitive abjection of English colonial whiteness and the victims of Hiroshima's bombing; and in the third section I argue that *English* whiteness in particular is persistently

[1] All references to Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (Toronto: Vintage, 1996) will be made in-text. All other references will be endnoted.